Developing School Board-Media Relationships

by Simon Leibovitz

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Simon Leibovitz
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Table of Contents

	Preface	**1**
	Introduction	**3**
	SECTION I POSITIVE RELATIONS	
1	**Developing Positive Relationships with the Media**	**6**
2	**Working with the Media**	**12**
3	**Methods of Liaising with the Media**	**18**
4	**Being Interviewed**	**22**
5	**Role of the PR Person**	**23**
6	**Role of the Reporter**	**25**
7	**Crisis Management**	**27**
	SECTION II NEGATIVE RELATIONS	
8	**Negative Relationships**	**32**
9	**Being Misquoted**	**35**
10	**No Comment**	**37**
11	**Off the Record - Truth or Fiction??**	**39**

12 Lodging Complaints 42
13 Charging the Media: What To Do When Things Go Wrong 45
14 Conclusion 49

SECTION III
THE SURVEY AT A GLANCE

Summary of the Survey 52
Statistical Summary 54
Sixty Strategic Tips 59

Appendices 66

PREFACE

Working with the media can be rewarding, if you think of it as an opportunity to present the work, objectives, and philosophy of your profession and institution. - Janet Cochran [1]

In the 1986 report, *Marketing the School System: Building Public Confidence in Schools*, the Canadian Education Association noted, "Although media coverage of education is nothing new, school boards today are using the mass media to their advantage. They are actively seeking media coverage and are buying advertising space in newspapers, radio and television to get their message across to the public." [2]

School boards endeavour to establish effective associations with radio and television stations and with daily and weekly newspapers in their area, to make the best use of the mass media. Through hiring experts in educational marketing, public relations and communications, and by availing themselves of the greater opportunities to participate in professional development, school boards are learning to develop positive relationships with the media, and are finding out how best to react to negative situations.

The purpose of this manual is to share information about a variety of methods that school boards use in the development of their own positive relationships with the media. This information was obtained from a survey of school boards across Canada and through research from current literature.

The survey, undertaken by CEA, was distrib-

1. Janet Cochran, *The Media and You*, Community and Public Relations Office, Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University, 1979.

2. Suzanne Tanguay, *Marketing the School System: Building Confidence in Schools* (Toronto: Canadian Education Association, 1986)

uted to school boards in September 1989. In a covering letter, the importance of gathering information through this survey was outlined - "As school boards become more visible and attract more attention, they are forced to learn how to deal effectively with the media - from placing stories and building positive relationships, to crisis management and ways of correcting wrong impressions and errors."

Surveys were sent to 156 school boards - 136 English and 20 French - across Canada. The following chart indicates the distribution, by province, the number and percentage of returned surveys.

	Questionnaires		
Province	**Sent**	**Returned**	**Percentage**
Alberta	22	15	68%
British Columbia	16	10	63%
Manitoba	12	7	58%
Newfoundland	4	1	25%
New Brunswick	13	9	69%
Northwest Territories	1	1	100%
Nova Scotia	6	5	83%
Ontario	50	36	72%
Prince Edward Island	4	3	75%
Quebec	18	13	72%
Saskatchewan	10	6	60%

Overall, 106/156 or 68% of the school boards responded. This high response rate makes the author feel justified in his assumptions about school board-media relations, based upon the survey results.

The manual is divided into two main sections - one on developing positive media relationships and the other on preventing and responding to negative situations. Each section is organized into a series of chapters on various topics related to either a positive or negative aspect of school board-media relations.

Simon L. Leibovitz
Executive Assistant to the Director
The Wellington County Board of Education
June 1990

INTRODUCTION

School boards, by the very nature of their existence, are always under scrutiny by the public. Whether publicly or privately funded, school boards constantly generate interest as parent and non-parent taxpayers spend considerable energy examining their effectiveness, both financially and academically.

As governmental bodies, school boards are obviously accountable to their various constituents. Like major corporations, educational organizations are bound to inform their stockholders — the public — of their varied activities. Unlike these corporations, that often only provide information annually through glossy reports, school boards must maintain communication with their many publics or system partners.

Although school boards tend to use several means of communicating their messages — internal staff bulletins, school newsletters, students' progress reports, numerous promotional items — the use of the mass media is probably the most influential way of communicating students' achievements and policy decisions made by school boards. News and feature stories as well as paid advertising on radio, television, and in the press provide the most economical and efficient way of communicating with a variety of system partners. These include students, parents, and the many sectors of the general community who either have an impact on or have a direct or indirect interest in the activities of the local school board.

Improving communication with their many internal and external publics is an obvious concern to school boards as witnessed by the dramatic increase in the number of communications experts hired by boards over the past three to five years. It is also obvious in the number of boards that have recently developed comprehensive policies in communications and media relations; the establishment of the Canadian Association of Communicators in Education, an organization devoted

to providing professional development opportunities for school board communication experts; and the general increase in workshops and conferences in this field and by publications from organizations such as the Canadian Education Association.

SECTION I

POSITIVE RELATIONS

1 DEVELOPING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE MEDIA

Developing a good working relationship with the media is a key step in increasing the community's understanding and support for public education.

- Edmonton Public Board Policy[3]

This is the most important part of this manual. The information contained in this chapter will be of interest to all school boards - those few that have a negative relationship with the media, those that are just starting to develop a relationship with the media, and those that want to improve upon an already established positive relationship with the media.

The majority of respondents to the survey indicated they enjoyed a positive relationship with the media. In fact, 87 school boards responded that they had such a relationship, while only four answered in the negative. It is interesting to note some of the comments offered by respondents about their media relationships:

- *CEO is a former newspaper editor, this helps*
- *must work at it continuously*
- *try to be open - usually reporters accept this at face value*
- *strongly developed - reporters know they get*

3. *Ibid.*

accurate information and are directed quickly to best source; trustees and senior staff are accessible and agendas for meetings are sent out in advance

- *it's a slow process - daily contacts and assistance require constant nurturing*

The following comment illustrates the importance of key communicators who liaise regularly with the media. It supports the increase in the number of newly created (within the past five years) positions of communications officers in many boards:

Our relationship with the media has improved considerably over the past two years. I attribute this improvement to our board's commitment to public relations.

Ways To Develop Positive Relationships with the Media

In what ways have boards developed positive media relations? Here's a list compiled from the answers to the CEA survey.

- Send thank you letters to media from both central office and from school personnel
- Invite to board meetings; provide background information to media; have resources and spokesperson available at meetings; provide follow-up when facts are incorrect; allow time for questions and interviews
- Be accessible - take time to answer all questions and promote the fact that schools are open at all times for visits
- Provide lots of material to them; advise them of upcoming events
- Meet with them frequently
- Send them only clear, factual information
- Return calls promptly; be aware of their deadlines
- Be honest, fair and professional
- After meetings, invite them to contact you for additional information

- Feed them good human interest stories - make their jobs easier
- Be professional - make sure the media's contact is a trained professional in PR and communications - not a converted teacher
- Be fair with all reporters - show no favourites
- Regular contact and openness - contact shouldn't be just when there is a crisis or when the board wants them to cover a special event - issue regular releases
- Frequently express thanks through meals, invitations, cards, letters, plaques or certificates of appreciation, ads in media (their own and others) thanking them
- Have a panel discussion between heads of local media and trustees or administrators to air beefs
- Invite new reporters to tour the office, meet with the CEO and chairperson of the board
- At each meeting, have the chairperson publicly welcome them to the meeting and recognize their efforts
- Special briefings ahead of meetings to provide extra information on complex topic - *e.g.*, budget
- Reporters appreciate a regular contact person; always return phone calls; be aware of deadlines; help them regardless of personal feelings, never argue with them; stick to facts and avoid opinions
- Good management, good personnel (on both sides) and good luck
- Stroking - person to person. The key to remember is that the media is the best way to speak to 20,000 parents and constituents...but say nothing that you would be ashamed to see on page one in "second-coming" type.

Brian Jamieson, communications officer with the North York Board, best sums up the importance of developing a positive relationship with the media:

A relationship with the media is built on mutual trust. Trust isn't developed overnight, but is the result of

cumulative actions. We understand the media has a job to do; we do not see them as cheerleaders. We try to be fair and honest with them and we expect the same in return.

Examples of Board Policies Stressing Positive Relationships

In the Carleton (Ont.) Board of Education's policy on Board/Community Relations, it states that the school is the focal point of information dissemination. The PR office co-ordinates the PR for both the schools and the system, maintains up-to-date contact lists, and uses a variety of means to publicize events and stories - including paid advertising, using public print media as the principal vehicle for paid notices of public interest and using the electronic media for short notice items or a specific special interest story.

The policy of the Regional Administrative Unit 3 (Charlottetown, PEI) states: "The board will seek to develop strong relations with the media, which play an important role in providing the public with current information on school matters. These relations will be founded on openness, fairness, and on consistency and continuity of contact."

The East Parry Sound (Ont.) Board's policy talks about the important role of the media in developing public understanding of school programs.

The board policy of the Lakeshore School Board (Beaconsfield, Que.) states that the goal of the board is to develop a good working relationship with the media. This goal is legitimized and given a certain status by being incorporated into board policy.

In the School District No. 20, in Saint John, N.B., the board policy on dealing with the media mandates the following: copies of the board meeting agenda are sent to the media before the meeting; the media people are invited to have dinner ahead of the meeting; media kits and background information are provided; announcements of all meetings are sent to the media; public relations staff and senior staff meet periodically

with the media; the CEO and chairperson are accessible; and periodic educational supplements are delivered in co-operation with the media.

Finally, the media relations policy of the Guysborough County District School Board (N.S.) states that the media provide a valuable service to the board. School staff are encouraged to welcome opportunities to provide to the media information that "doesn't involve anything that would cause personal embarrassment or derogatory comparisons among the schools." The board wisely states in the policy that "in all dealings with the news media, good sense, candour and good judgement must be exercised."

What Do the "Professionals" Say about Positive Relations?

The preceding comments, provided by chief executive officers and communication officers, provide useful, practical ideas for developing positive relationships with the media. Professional, non-board media types also applaud the benefits of a positive relationship with the media. Their thoughts, summarized below, provide both a philosophical and practical basis for the development and maintenance of positive media relations:

Ed Shiller from *Managing the Media*

To help achieve your organization's goals, you try to get the media to convey your message to the audiences that are important to you. And you interest the media in your message by presenting it in a captivating way that will successfully compete with the millions of other messages that vie every day for the attention of your audience....if you don't tell your story right, someone else may tell it wrong.[4]

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4. Ed Shiller, *Managing the Media* (Toronto: Bedford House Publishing, 1989), p. 41.

If the success of your organization depends on the quality and dedication of the people who work for you, positive media coverage is a magnet that will attract the brightest and best in each profession.[5]

Newspapers, magazines, radio and television are the only practical means at your disposal for reaching mass audiences - for broadcasting your message. It makes sense, therefore, for media relations to hold a prominent position in your overall communication plan. [6]

The goal of media relations, therefore, is to maximize your control over the media. It is to manage the media, by improving the odds that your message will be reported accurately, completely and credibly.[7]

"Working with the Media," article in *School Public Relations - The Complete Book*

Controlling the press is out of the question. But working with them to assure accurate, objective coverage of both the good and the bad is what school-media relations should be all about.[8]

The success a reporter has in telling your school story depends largely on your willingness to provide usable information and how available you are to explain and clarify this information. [9]

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5. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
8. National School Public Relations Association, *School Public Relations: The Complete Book* (Reston, Va.: NSPRA, 1986).
9. *Ibid.*

2 WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

On the whole I find the media to be very easy to deal with provided you are honest with them. If you work closely and co-operatively with them, they can be a great ally.

- Brian Hartsook, Executive Assistant, Saskatoon Board of Education

This section will examine the kinds of media used by board communications officers, the types and frequency of media contacts made by them, and the use of media lists and designated spokesmen.

Kinds of Media

In Canada, according to Shiller,[10] there are 141 daily newspapers, 958 weekly and community papers, 127 business and financial papers, 122 consumer publications, 789 radio stations and 164 television stations. In addition there are cable television outlets, news syndicates and wire services.

Other media used by school boards include newsletters of parents' groups, religious papers (usually used by a separate school board), bus shelters, chamber of commerce magazines and newsletters, provincial newsletters, church bulletins, ethnic papers, and the boards' own educational supplements inserted in newspapers and magazines.

From the CEA survey, we found that radio is the medium that is most often used by boards to relay

10. Ed Shiller, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

messages to their publics, followed by daily newspapers and then weekly or community newspapers. Every board responding to this question in the survey (73) indicated that they use radio to convey messages.

Type	Number of School Boards
radio	73
daily newspapers	69
weekly/community papers	60
cable television	45
local television (not cable)	44
all of the above	9

Respondents also indicated that weekly newspapers provide the most consistent coverage of board and school events and that those using radio advertising usually have 90-second ads on a twice daily basis.

Contacting the Media

Communication is obviously a two-way process and the contact between school boards and the media is reciprocal. The majority of boards indicated that the initiation of contact by and to the media is balanced.

According to the survey, the most common ratio of contact initiated by a board in comparison with that initiated by the media is 50%-50% (as indicated below), although the next highest responses were 75% and 80% respectively, initiated by the media.

The survey indicated that the majority of contact between boards and the media is weekly.

How Often School Boards Contact the Media

46 weekly
21 daily
31 once a month
6 every couple of months
3 bi-weekly basis
2 once or twice a year

How Often Do the Media Contact School Boards?

48 weekly
35 once a month
16 daily
8 every couple of months
0 once or twice a year

Contact Initiated by Board/by Media

Percentage		Number of Boards
By Board	By Media	
2	98	1
10	90	1
15	85	2
20	80	10
25	75	2
30	70	4
35	65	1
40	60	8
50	50	21
60	40	6
70	30	3
75	25	7
80	20	3
85	15	1
90	10	6

Types of Contact

Boards were asked to comment on the type of contact that occurred with the media. Was it on an informal basis, by media release, or by media conference? The most frequent type of contact is informal and weekly. Most boards send out releases, weekly or monthly, and hold conferences once or twice a year, perhaps every couple of months.

Informal Contact (a telephone call, seeing at meeting, in school)

once/twice a year	1
every couple of months	16
once a month	24
weekly	38
daily	17

Media Release

once/twice a year		11
every couple of months		25
once a month		7
weekly		33
daily	(large metropolitan board)	1

Media Conference

once/twice a year	43
every couple of months	17
once a month	16
weekly	0
daily	0

Media Lists

The majority of boards responding to this question utilize media lists - 79 use them on a regular basis, while 26 indicated that they do not have such lists at all. Tailored lists are used by 33 boards; 40 do not use lists.

Many of the boards that use a general list commented that there are not enough media in their jurisdictions to warrant a more tailored list; a few, however, indicated the opposite - there are too many media in the area! A few plan to make their lists more specific in the future.

According to Dick Dodds, director of education at the East York Board in Toronto, a media list, to be of the most use, should be designed with the following information: name of media, title of media contact, address, to whom information should be sent; an indication of the kind of material that media wants (if large

enough area to warrant); the coverage area of the particular media; their deadlines and how far in advance they want to receive material.

Tailored media lists are usually used by larger boards that deal with a large number and different kinds of media. The following are examples of the type of information contained on the tailored lists as supplied by the boards responding to the question:

- Job description of contact - sports reporter, photographer, features writer, entertainment, city editor, etc.
- Listed by district
- List journalist, assignment editor, news director
- Listed by proximity and circulation
- A local list and a more general one (larger district, province, etc.)
- By region, ethnicity

Designated Spokesperson

Some 72 boards indicated that they have a designated spokesperson to respond to the media; 28 do not. When asked if the appointed person is designated all the time, or only for crisis situations, 56 boards responded. Eight said only in crisis, but the majority (48) said they have the same designated spokesperson all the time.

Although some boards stated that the designation of the spokesperson depends on the situation, most designate the CEO as the chief spokesperson. The next highest response was the board chair, closely followed by the information officer. Other responses included - the superintendent, executive assistant, and "the person involved."

It is important for school boards to have a designated spokesperson to deal with the media in "normal" everyday circumstances, but it is especially important to use this person in times of crisis.

At the 1989 Canadian Association of Communicators in Education Conference, held in Banff in Octo-

ber, Dick Dodds, of the East York Board of Education, presented an informative workshop on crisis management and the development of a crisis plan. He stressed the importance of a quick and bold response to all internal and external publics, including the media, by one spokesperson. "Crisis management involves an open and honest response, based on accurate information delivered by one unflappable, honest individual (with one backup)."[11]

Policy on Who May Speak to the Media

The response was balanced between boards who do and do not have a policy on who may speak to the media on behalf of a school board - 42 boards responded in the affirmative; 45 said they do not have such a policy. Of those responding positively, the director and chairman were the positions most often identified. Some indicated that the director would be the spokesperson if the matter related to operations, but the chairman would deal strictly with board policy. In a few cases, the information officer was identified as the main board spokesperson.

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11. Dick Dodds, "How to Write a Crisis Management Plan," address given at Canadian Association of Communicators in Education, annual conference, Banff, October 1989.

3 METHODS OF LIAISING WITH THE MEDIA

To "manage" the media is not to dictate to reporters and editors what they should or should not print or say about you....(It) is, however, knowing what you'd like the media to report about you and knowing how to tell your story in such a way that the media will likely report it the way you want.

— Ed Shiller[12]

Boards indicated that there are several ways of establishing and maintaining contact with the media. These include the media kit and media guide, using media release forms and holding media conferences. In addition, 27 respondents indicated that their boards have established media plans; however, 80 indicated that they do not. One of the examples is from Peterborough County (Ont.), which has a five-year communications plan. It outlines board initiatives related to overall communication with its publics, information on the board logo and slogan, ways to communicate and how to employ effective media relations.

Media Kit

Media kits can be employed to help reporters by providing background information, employee profiles and special data on major events, including school strikes, school closings and budget decisions. These are

12. Ed Shiller, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

often used at media news conferences, usually by larger boards.

Media kits often contain a covering letter from the CEO or communications officer, a news release, the full text of a speech (if one is delivered), fact sheets, biographies of key individuals, and glossy photographs. Some boards, like School District No. 20 in Saint John (N.B.), state in their media relations policies that such kits will be provided.

Media Guides

Many boards have developed media guides to help employees and trustees in dealing with the media on a regular basis. They provide general information on topics such as media releases and conferences, how to use a board logo and slogan, and how to make contact with media informally. They usually contain media lists.

Many boards submitted examples of their media guides; the main contents of several are outlined below:

Edmonton Catholic School Board - Alberta
- This board's guide is called "Sharing School Spirit - How to Get Your School in the News"
- It contains tips on how to identify and classify a story as hard news, news feature, sports, photo opportunity, public service announcement, etc.
- It shows how to contact media, and when, etc.
- It's meant to make the role/job of media person easier
- It also has tips on co-operating with media

Lakeshore School Board - Quebec
- Guide is called "How to Handle the Media" - gives name of press contact, personal contact at school
- How to write a press release
- Value of public service announcements
- Using the telephone, calling a conference

The Wellington County Board of Education - Ontario
- This board's guide is called "A Guide to Working With the Media." It has items on:

- How to prepare a release, content and format - sample
- Media conference - when, why and how to set up
- Media list - address, phone, editor, assignment editor and deadlines
- Tips on liaising with media

Edmonton Public Board - Alberta
- This board's handbook says "Developing a good working relationship with the media is a key step in increasing the community's understanding and support for public education"
- Cites results of survey of media done in 1988
- Section on what is news, how to get coverage, portrait of media (stats on dailies, weeklies, magazines, radio, television), preparing a release (a sample release is provided), arranging a conference, what to do when a reporter calls

Media Release

Aside from informal contact, through telephone calls, speaking to reporters at meetings and in schools, the most common formal way to notify the media is through the media/news/press release.

Frequency of News Releases

33 school boards issue one per week
27 school boards issue one per month
25 school boards issue one every couple of months
11 school boards issue one to two per year
1 school board issues one on a daily basis

Suggestions on Preparing a Media Release

- Use lead or "grabber"
- Name a contact person from whom the media can get more information
- End all but last page with the word "more"
- In writing, use usual 5W's (where, who, when, what and why), use as many as possible
- Avoid jargon
- Use active tense

- Use "30" to indicate the end
- Use headline or title
- State release time
- Proof, proof again, proof again and again!!!
- Use quotations to liven it up
- Be factual, keep it simple
- Use a common format every time - this makes it easy to recognize
- Add "for further comment" and give contact's phone number
- Find an interesting angle
- Type double-spaced

Media Conference

The media conference is not used as often as the release; it is only used in special circumstances. In fact, Shiller warns that the conference should be used "sparingly and intelligently" because if an organization calls too many, you get into the "cry wolf" syndrome and the media will disregard the importance of them.[13]

Frequency of News Conferences

3 school boards hold one-two per year
17 school boards hold one every couple of months
16 school boards hold one per month

Janet Cochran outlines the following steps for organizing and holding a media conference:

- Advance planning is the key to success
- Notify media well in advance
- Make sure it's a newsworthy item to assure attendance
- Hold at a convenient (to the media) hour (not when they have major deadlines, publishing time, etc.)
- A brief summation should be made by the principal speaker at the beginning
- Allow ample time for question period
- If a speech is delivered, have the text or abstract available

13. *Ibid.*, p.65.

4 BEING INTERVIEWED

> *... in all dealings with the news media, good sense, candour and good judgement must be exercised.*
>
> - Guysborough (Nova Scotia) County District School Board Policy

The most common type of personal contact a media relations person will have with a reporter is providing information to the reporter in an interview.

The following are practical tips, provided by professional media experts.

Ken Smith, Canada News-Wire service, from Canadian Press article entitled "Honest, Most Reporters Are Nice Guys":

- Treat reporters as professionals
- Time is valuable so stick to the point
- Be helpful
- Use clear and simple language to explain
- Don't ask to check the story
- Don't respond unless you know the answer
- Think and then respond

Steve Barham, in "Practical Tips to Survive Your Next Media Encounter," reprinted in *OSTC Newsletter:*

- Be on time
- Explain your position
- Don't be defensive
- Be concise
- Be enthusiastic
- Don't respond to hypothetical questions
- Relax, practice slow breathing
- Speak naturally
- If interview is in person, maintain good eye contact

5 ROLE OF THE PR PERSON

We must accept that they (the media) have their own agenda but we must do our best to keep them informed, and provide them with every available opportunity to report the good news, board directions, and staff initiatives, accurately and fairly.

— Mike Farrell, Communications Officer, Waterloo County Board of Education, Kitchener, Ontario

Obviously, it is incumbent upon the public relations person to successfully establish positive relations with the media. The PR person may be the board's communications/public relations officer, the director or superintendent, or even the chairperson of the board (rare). It is up to this person, with the available financial and human resources, to develop a rapport with various media to attempt to ensure positive media relationships.

The National School Public Relations Associations' (NSPRA) *School Public Relations: The Complete Book* well defines the role of the PR specialist:

To be effective, the school PR specialist or school administrator must fully understand the media. He or she must be ready to accept the fact that generally bad news, rather than good, sells newspapers and determines the ratings of radio and TV newscasts. Certainly, features about kids and animals and some positive news are part of that package. But the simple fact is, that media that

do not report violence, expose corruption, crusade for the taxpayer, hold a magnifying glass to the government fishbowl and tell where things went wrong usually go out of business. [14]

What the Board's PR People Say

Some school board policies dealing with either general communications or with working with the media spell out certain aspects of the PR person's role.

The Saskatoon Board's policy states that the PR person "will provide liaison with news media to ensure adequate coverage of activities of the system," while the Carleton (Ont.) Board's policy states that the PR officer will maintain up-to-date lists, keep consistent contact with the media, co-ordinate media inquiries and requests for interviews, and assist schools in their media relations

* * *

We are lucky to have good relations with the local media. They are eager for positive upbeat feature stories, not just scandals. We direct them whenever possible. — Lynne MacNicol, Communications Co-ordinator, Calgary Catholic School District, Calgary, Alberta.

Communication has to be open and frank. If we are suspicious, the media will be suspicious and vice-versa. — Colette Rémillard Desautels, Communications Consultant, Commission Scolaire de Brossard, Brossard, Quebec.

We need the media. We are not always as helpful as we should be. We need to make media relations a priority. — Carole Weir, Superintendent, Frontenac-Lennox and Addington County Roman Catholic Separate School Board, Kingston, Ontartio

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14. National School Public Relations Association, *op. cit.*

5 ROLE OF THE REPORTER

Most reporters consider themselves just as professional as anyone in a school board. Respecting them as professionals and assisting them in any way will win my organization their respect, and, in the long run, better media coverage.

— Earl Evans, Information Officer,
York Region Board of Education
Aurora, Ontario

The role of the reporter is equally as important to the development of positive media relations as is the role of the public relations person. To be as effective as possible, the PR person must have an appreciation for and a solid understanding of the reporters' duties, responsibilities and commitments to their profession.

Often reporters assigned to an education beat are "rookies" or at least unfamiliar with the complexities of the educational systems. They require clear, factual statements often with detailed explanations. The importance of this is explained well by both Janet Cochran and by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA).

Cochran reflects on her relations with reporters: "Be prepared to simplify, if necessary, explain patiently and emphasize your main point frequently." [15] NSPRA offers this advice for communication officers: "The success a reporter has in telling your school story depends largely on your willingness to provide usable information and how available you are to explain and clarify this information."[16]

15. Janet Cochran, *op. cit.*
16. National School Public Relations Association, *op. cit.*

General Comments from Respondents

Respect the fact that reporters are trained professionals, for the most part, in their particular field.

Reporters have deadlines - they are often/usually pressed for time, so be considerate and respect deadlines, return calls promptly.

Reporters don't write headlines - editors do.

Specific Comments from Participants

Relationships are built over many years through mutual understanding and respect for each other's task. To patronize the media is irresponsible; to ignore the media is folly. We need the services of the media as much as it needs us. — Tom Moore, Executive Secretary, London Board of Education, Ontario

One should remember that "the educational beat" is frequently given to the rookie reporter, the lowest on the totem pole. The only way to make a name for yourself and move up is to get noticed. The best way is to find a story that will sell newspapers, or make the headlines. — Dr. Geoff Tagg, Superintendent of Schools, Peace River School Division No. 10, Alberta

From the Perspective of the Reporter

Tom Clark, CTV reporter, talks about appreciating the role of the reporter who wants to get a good story because it is "part of the job." He states: "Often a spokesperson is always in 'uninterruptable' meetings, that break up ten minutes past their deadline" and "... secretaries have an obsession for losing messages or failing to pass them on."[17]

Ken Smith says, "Honest, most reporters are nice guys. They have a pretty strong sense of responsibility, and they try to do the best job they can within the limitations they face."[18]

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17. Tom Clark, "How to Handle the TV News Reporter," *CNW Papers* #5 (Montreal: Canada-News Wire Ltd., October 1982).

18. Ken Smith, "Honest, Most Reporters Are Nice Guys," *CNW Papers* #4 (Montreal: Canada-News Wire Ltd., September 1982).

7 CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Remember, every crisis has an ending.
— Dick Dodds, Director of Education,
East York Board of Education,
Toronto, Ontario

Crisis management was a popular phrase in the 1980s and probably will be prevalent in the 1990s as well. As organizations grow in complexity and become more accessible and visible to the public, the likelihood of crises in communication arising will increase. Increasingly, boards of education are developing crisis management plans to deal with situations before they happen.

According to the boards surveyed, 47 have dealt with some type of crisis situation in the past; 22 respondents have not. The most common situation is the school strike.

The majority of school boards responding to this question do not have a crisis management plan. Some 32 boards indicated they have such a plan, 63 do not. Many of those that do not, however, thought it was a good idea and will now work on one; others said they have a plan, but not in written form. Quite a few indicated that they are currently developing a plan. Many boards without one commented that each crisis is dealt with individually and specific plans are developed as the particular crisis arises. One person said that although such a plan is needed, he couldn't find the time to work on one!

Those boards responding in the affirmative about using either an established, formally written crisis plan or unwritten procedures suggested the following steps for any crisis:

• Use an *ad hoc* committee to analyze the impact of the crisis on students and community. Use it to develop an appropriate plan and then execute it.

• Give an honest response to the media, inform the board chair and trustees, convene all players and determine parameters.

• Contact media by phone, give as much information as possible.

• Establish a centralized planning committee; the plan is developed at an emergency meeting.

Specific Situations Cited as Examples

Death of a student: information officer went to school to assist and co-ordinate strategy development and deployment, to handle enquiries and to report back to CEO.

In strike situation: contacted media directly; used prepared releases to correct any misinformation that had already appeared in print.

School closure due to structural problems: information letter sent to families of students, trustees met with school's Home and School Executive, then held joint press conference.

• • •

Two other interesting comments were offered by respondents: "We have no plan, because every crisis is different - AIDS is different from an earthquake!" and a very pertinent comment - "designate one spokesperson, who gets the facts and reports them to the media." The appointment of a designated spokesperson is one of the most important steps to follow in a crisis. It is advocated by both the board of education "experts" and the professionals in the field.

How to Develop a Crisis Management Plan

At the 1989 CACE Conference, Dick Dodds provided an excellent overview on the development of a crisis management plan:

- Collect the facts pertinent to the crisis
- Put the plan together
- Communicate the plan to internal and external publics
- Seek feedback (before, during and after a crisis)
- Evaluate the plan (before, during and after a crisis)

Ed Shiller expands upon these ideas in his book and suggests that any organization should have a plan in place prior to the occurrence of a crisis. [19]

Before the crisis occurs

Draw up and distribute a comprehensive crisis communications plan.
Make a list of possible spokespersons for each operation.
Train designated spokespersons to give media interviews.
Set up internal communications lines to ensure you are informed immediately when a crisis occurs.
Prepare a list of inside and outside people to inform of a crisis.
Ensure that all employees know where to direct media enquiries.

When the crisis occurs

Meet with senior management to determine the stance to take with the media.
Brief designated spokespersons.
Issue a public statement.
Distribute statement to staff and other key people.

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19. Ed Shiller, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

Ensure that the media know who the spokespersons are.
Issue periodic statements or hold periodic media briefings or news conferences, if crisis is ongoing.

A Media Crisis

Only a handful of boards, ten to be exact, said that they had been involved in a crisis where there was a problem with the media reporting on a situation. The majority of those responding to the question in the survey (80) stated they had not been in this type of situation. Most of these situations involved the reporting of events such as strikes and school closings. A few extraordinary examples are cited below:

- Lead "found" in water at school: TV crews filmed in school, story blown out of proportion, distorted facts. Board issued immediate release to say that board was co-operating with local health unit and testing was being done. Immediate response from board acknowledging or verifying situation and their reaction.

- Violent accident on weekend involving school personnel: was reported incorrectly; on Monday the principal clarified the situation.

- Comment on media crisis from one board - "Secondary school teacher announced engagement/wedding plans with 17-year-old student at school; paper initially [gave it] World War III attention."

- In New Brunswick, a teacher, who thought it was "off the record," discussed issue of a student who had been asked to temporarily step aside as student council president because she was pregnant.

SECTION II

NEGATIVE RELATIONS

8 NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Negative relations generally occur when an institution avoids the media, doesn't inform the media accurately, hides information, doesn't understand how the media works. Most reporters are fair, ethical and professional.

- Pauline Janitch,
Communications Officer,
Northumberland and Newcastle Board
of Education, Cobourg, Ontario

The CEA survey found that very few school boards have experienced negative relationships with the media. This section provides information, however, on the perspective of some boards and public relations professionals on various aspects of negative media relations - harmful media coverage, being misquoted, the use or misuse of the phrases "no comment" and "off the record," and lodging complaints against the media, in various forms.

Survey Responses

Respondents did comment about their negative experiences with the media. Boards were also asked if they have a policy for dealing with negative media coverage.

Although 61 respondents indicated that they have encountered "negative" coverage of some sort, the majority of these experiences were not negative to a great degree and were easily corrected.

Examples from Boards of Negative Coverage

• On language question, we felt it was a lack of professional ethics: met with owners of media but we had no success (New Brunswick board).

• Article on perceived bad performance at secondary level of students in 1987-88 was published: we explained truth.

• Results were made public on study of immigration groups and how they relate to schools: only negative aspects were noted, so we protested to editor who refused to rectify; the board bought a full page ad to explain other side.

Comments on How Situations Have Been Corrected

• We directly phoned the person who wrote the article, we told the person that information was wrong and asked in future that the right information be communicated.

• We asked that a retraction be printed, we wrote letters to editor.

• One-sided reporting, so we released more detailed explanation.

• Journalist did incomplete report, gave wrong information, so we published a second report to correct.

• A release was misinterpreted; we pointed this out to the journalist.

• Consistent negative tone and anti-board slant; so our director visited the publisher.

One respondent summed up the feelings of many respondents: "If not major, forget about it. They will place the correction on the back page."

Policy on Dealing with Negative Media Coverage

The majority of boards that responded (72) do not have such a policy; only six boards do have a policy.

School boards provided the following reasons for not having a policy:

- *Deal with it on an individual basis; many are the same.*

- *Hard to redo - will confuse the issue even more.*

- *No - just work hard on developing positive coverage instead. Fight negative with positive.*

- *No - it comes with the territory.*

- *Correct in board's own monthly column which is widely read.*

- *Don't try to correct or ask for apologies - it only makes things worse.*

- *Only talk to media about it if the story is "inaccurate" as opposed to "unfavourable."*

- *Negative media stories are rarely made positive by responding to them in the media. It adds fuel to the fire, in most cases.*

The following lengthy, but conclusive, statement from Jocelyn Tennison, communications officer with the Strathcona County Board in Sherwood Park, Alberta, best sums up the feelings of those cited above:

We have to be objective about the fact that it is the media's job not just to present our good news, but to present both sides of an issue. Often that means presenting points of view of people who do not agree with something the board or system is doing. Before criticizing the media for being "negative," we have to honestly assess whether a story represents an honest difference of opinion among members of the community, or whether it has been written in a way that is deliberately damaging to the school system.

9 BEING MISQUOTED

One has to understand where the media is coming from, answer their questions when you clearly understand what's asked. Provide your story so it has little success in being used in a negative manner.

— Ted West, Superintendent of Schools, County of Athabasca #12, Alberta

The chance of being misquoted is probably the largest area of concern to school boards. In the survey, boards were not asked to quantify how often they had been misquoted, but rather to give examples of when they had been misquoted, and what action they took to resolve the problem. Many boards, however, offered suggestions or ways to try and ensure not being misquoted in the first place.

When Does Being Misquoted Happen and What Should You Do?

- *Happens when journalists are in a hurry or lack all information.*
- *When they have to rely on accuracy from their own interpretation of verbal remarks from board.*
- *Reporters are not often as aware or informed on the topic as they should be.*
- *Media don't understand education; they are just looking for sensational lead stories.*

- *Inexperienced reporters, many "cub" reporters, get educational beat.*

- *Some reporters tend to exaggerate. Headline writers are a different breed.*

One respondent offered an interesting perspective on seeking corrections: "Don't correct. People tend to believe they are misquoted when the slant of a report is directed a different way from what they would prefer."

Be Quoted Properly in the First Place

- Issue a prepared statement.
- Develop mutual trust.
- Have a designated spokesperson - have a limited number of board staff dealing with media in first place.
- Provide clear and concise information with a minimal degree of educational jargon.
- Planning ahead is vital before returning calls; don't be hesitant to promise to call back with answer, don't wing it; on TV or radio, use short quotes, it's more difficult for person to get them wrong; don't say too much, and repeat message so often they have to use it and use it right.
- Prepare a statement as a guide; don't read it; speak clearly.
- Hold workshops for key staff on how to deal with the media.
- Have an open dialogue with media.
- Be available, never say "no comment," never chastise, and be careful.

Other comments were:

- Fortunate to have good reporters.
- Board writes 60% of its own stories.

10 NO COMMENT

Long ago I was taught that the three cardinal rules of media relations are:
1. Never lie; 2. Never say "No comment";
3. Never say anything is off the record.
- Jocelyn Tennison, Communications Officer, Strathcona County Board of Education, Sherwood Park, Alberta

Respondents to CEA's survey were equally emphatic on using this phrase, never using it, or sometimes using it.

Okay To Use...What It Means

From the survey we find that the phrase "no comment" is used to tell a reporter that information is either not available or is confidential, that there is nothing to add to what has already been stated, that the board is not yet prepared to make a statement because not all information has been gathered, or that no further information will (ever) be disclosed on the subject. Here is a sample of responses:

The school is not ready to make a statement.

Unable to make statement due to confidentiality.

Say "no comment" because some issues, because of circumstances, are not in public realm.

Information is as is: nothing further to add.

Means not able or unwilling to comment now or at another time.

"Unable to respond at this time" - This suggests that you will have a response later.

Never Use; It Creates A Bad Impression

An equal number of people advised against using "no comment" at any time because of the negative impression it gives to the media. They also believe that using "No comment" suggests that an individual or the board is guilty. Its use gives the impression there is some truth to the issue or question posed by the media. These respondents suggest that it is better to give some answer than use the phrase.

It's a negative position to avoid.

"You're hiding something; I never say this."

Never to be used.

Media will then search for more, do more digging.

Don't use term, explain why you can't elaborate.

It's a poor excuse, a way of making reporters angry.

Taboo. This statement should never be used.

If you don't have information or anything more to disclose, tell the reporter this. Be fair and honest, explain situation and avoid any suspicions that might result in negative coverage.

Creates media problems. Better to indicate that you cannot discuss issue at this time and will get back if and when you can.

Seen as attempt to cover up.

Stonewalling. Says "I'm guilty."

1 OFF THE RECORD - TRUTH OR FICTION???

> *The most important thing to remember about speaking to the media is that nothing, I repeat, nothing is "off the record." Everything you say can be used by the reporter. My advice is to play it safe: don't tell a reporter anything you don't want to see in print.* - Ed Shiller [20]

The reviews were mixed on the use of "off the record" comments. Very diverse and varying opinions were received from respondents. "Off the record" comments tend to be poison to the person making the comments and music to the ears of the investigative reporter. Some respondents never use or make "off the record" comments; some always use this phrase (with or without caution); and a few, seldom (if they know the right person and have a trusting relationship). This seems like a compromise position, but to many, including this author, it is a dangerous compromise.

Okay To Use (in the Right Situation)

The majority of school boards who said it is all right to use "off the record" comments feel that such comments are only background information for a reporter and that the comments will not be published, printed or recorded in any way for public use. They believe it is all right if you know the reporter through a

20. Ed Shiller, *op. cit.*, p.48.

long and trusting relationship. The comments below revolved around these two premises.

Not for publication - only for the edification of the reporter.

A casual comment.

Made to reporter, therefore it is privileged, but it should not be published or reported.

Privileged information, not to be printed.

Talk about issues so that reporter can gain insight into issues, but not to be directly quoted.

Confidential, not to be published.

I know it won't be used in an article.

Information given but not recorded.

Have personal rapport with reporter before using this phrase.

Reporter is morally bound not to report.

Reporter is getting personal opinion; I only use this comment with one or two I trust.

Never Use - Forbidden

Comments from the following respondents tended to revolve around the premise that reporters may, depending on the situation (pressure from competition, editors, etc.) use any comments, whether the board person feels or states they are off the record or not. Their responses, outlined below, are stronger, more bitter and caustic than those supporting its use. Many said "Nothing is ever 'off the record'," or "There is no such thing as 'off the record'."

Don't fall into the writer's trap, say what you want to have published or say nothing at all.

I adhere to the philosophy that if you don't want it printed, don't say it.

It means "on the record" - you have just added impetus for the reporter to print or say what has just been stated "off the record."

Meaningless; do not use this "device."

Never use this phrase because it isn't fair to the media and I value my job!!!

When you are speaking to the media, expect to be quoted.

12 LODGING COMPLAINTS

Do nothing until you are over your first flush of anger, then, decide upon the severity of the error. If it is not too serious, then it is better to "forgive and forget."

- Janet Cochran [21]

According to research, the first thing to do when a error is discovered is to contact the reporter who "made the error," usually by telephone; if necessary, follow the call up with a letter. Mixed comments were received from the survey on this topic; they are, however, all good words of wisdom:

Work through your CEO and the paper's managing editor.

Phone the writer directly, then speak with the editor; if necessary send a letter to writer and publisher.

Always put the complaint in writing.

Direct contact with journalist is always the best.

Contact the editor first, the publisher second, and if necessary, the press council.

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Three of the best comments are worth highlighting:

21. Janet Cochran, *op. cit.*

Submit a letter with the correct information!

Ask if they will print something positive!

Approach the media with care, sensitivity and respect!!!

Letters to the Editor

The most common approach is sending the "proverbial letter to the editor" when a serious error occurs, or, worse, reoccurs, after the initial contact with the journalist. Of the respondents, 33 indicated that they have used this approach. Although 60 respondents have not, they did not take any approach. Their comments on the outcome of sending a letter are as follows:

Media printed the letter.

Correction was printed.

Received letter of apology and explanation.

Letter acknowledged, with promise to be more attentive to details in the future.

It appears that for those that employ the "letter to the editor" method, the results are positive. Both the respondents and the "experts" in the field stress that if a letter is sent to an editor, the person writing it should stick to the facts, be brief and to the point, be firm and outline the specific problems with the article or news report. As one respondent to the survey cautioned, "Remember, you're not out to get the reporter!"

If a letter to the editor is not published, or has been edited before being printed to obscure the salient points, or if satisfaction has not been received in any other form, it was suggested by many that the appropriate press council or other ombudsman type of agency or individual be contacted.

Contacting a Press Council

Only three respondents said they had contacted the Press Council in their jurisdiction about erroneous reporting; 93 said they had never done so. Of the three respondents, one said that the local council ruled in favour of the media (no details provided); the second involved apparent biased reporting (at the time of the transfer of secondary schools), but no outcome was mentioned.

In the third case, the information officer contacted an advisory board to which she belonged. She commented, "A student's well-being was threatened because he was quoted by a reporter. Discussion basically led back to the fact that it was our responsibility to educate students on the consequences of talking to a reporter."

For details on Press Councils and lodging complaints see page 69.

3 CHARGING THE MEDIA - WHAT TO DO WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

It's inevitable that sooner or later, despite your best efforts, news accounts will contain errors that put your organization in a bad light...In any event, do your swearing and indignant desk-pounding in the privacy of your office. Ranting and raving to the reporter or editor won't help you.

- Ed Shiller[22]

Human nature dictates that people, with the best of intentions, will and do make mistakes. The media are no exception to this rule. Although highly trained professionals are receiving accurate information from highly reliable sources, errors often occur in print and in radio and television reporting.

In most cases, the errors are either factual or stem from a reporter's misinterpretation . Seldom are they a blatant misrepresentation or denigration of any individual or organization.

When errors are made, several approaches can be taken to correct the situation. Some communications officers do nothing, because they feel that, unless the error is substantial, it is better to "forgive and forget" than cause trouble with the media. They believe that

22. Ed Shiller, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

taking a step to correct the perceived negative coverage will just bring more attention to the situation.

Their comments ranged from "I don't think I would lodge a complaint with the media. It is not a win-win situation" to "not worth it, the correction will appear on page 16!" One person compromised on this last extreme: "[only complain] if the distorted information can be rectified in a credible manner."

The following, somewhat facetious comment, provided by Harold Marshall, communications officer with the Winnipeg School Division, provides an interesting perspective on seeking corrections:

We find the media to be mostly fair. The odd reporter gets carried away from time to time, but it isn't worthwhile getting steamed up over it. What's hot today, wraps the fish tonight!

When to Ask for a Correction

Here is a sampling of comments to the question, "When is it acceptable to ask for a correction or retraction?"

- *When reported facts mislead parents, students, board.*
- *If you have been deliberately misquoted.*
- *When a factual error could create major public concern - e.g., when a school closing has been reported as taking place in 1989, when it is really scheduled for 1990.*
- *Personal attacks on trustees or employees.*

Two, more substantial, comments stated by respondents best sum up the need to seek a correction.

When an error is such that it calls into question the integrity of a system or its staff; when the incorrect information can have a very detrimental effect on the system's service to the public.

[When the error] clearly contradicts supplied information or perspective on a controversial topic, which, if unchallenged, could interfere with board operations.

So, You've Found a Mistake - Now What?

As indicated above, some errors made by the media may be insignificant and require no action. The research suggests that when you encounter or at least think you've encountered an error, the following steps should be taken or the following questions considered **before** taking any action:

- Analyze what is wrong.

- Check and verify facts (if determined to be factual error).

- Facts may be correct, but the overall slant or perspective is wrong and some facts have been omitted.

- Certain words have been used by a reporter to create a wrong impression.

Overall, respondents' comments suggested that:

- If the complaint is legitimate - RECTIFY AND TAKE ACTION!

- If negative coverage is received, and deserved - STOP!!!

Taking Legal Action

Seeking legal action against the media is obviously a last resort, and is seldom used by the boards contacted by CEA.

Only two said that legal action had ever been pursued by their boards against the media; 101 of the

respondents said their boards had never taken any legal action.

The above suggestions put forward various ways to approach the media when a school board feels it has received negative coverage. All can be useful, depending on the situation. In general, the most practical way is best summed up by the National School Public Relations Association, as cited in the article "Working with the Media," from *School Public Relations - The Complete Book*.

> *You have a responsibility to let the media know when they've made a mistake. Take your complaint first to your reporter and point out the factual mistake. If factual errors continue, then it's time to alert the reporter's boss. Most media people are after fair and accurate reporting and they'll see that you get it if your complaints are legitimate and you follow the proper channels.* [23]

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23. National School Public Relations Association, *op. cit.*

4 CONCLUSION

It is evident that school boards can, and do, enjoy healthy, successful and positive relationships with the media. According to our survey, favourable media coverage is received by most boards in Canada. These relationships are nurtured, strengthened and maintained by two groups of hardworking professionals - the communication specialists employed by school boards (information officers, communications officers, public relations directors, etc.) and the reporters, editors, and publishers who make up the media.

The results of the CEA survey indicate that there are several factors contributing to the development of positive school board-media relations: the designation of one main board spokesperson with the media, which leads to the development of a personal rapport with a reporter; constant contact with the media; efficient liaison with the media - releases, conferences, kits, plans, guides, and lists; the establishment and utilization, when necessary, of crisis management plans and policies; determining when to complain to the media and knowing how to do so properly.

The majority of school boards believe they enjoy positive relationships with the media. As the tendency for the general public to want to know more about the educational system and the subsequent need for school boards to share information continues to increase, developing positive media relations will continue to occupy an important focus for school boards across Canada.

SECTION III

THE SURVEY AT A GLANCE

A SUMMARY OF THE SURVEY

1. The majority of school boards believe they enjoy good relationships with the media.

2. The majority of school boards indicated that the initiation of contact by and to the media is fairly balanced; the media initiates contact slightly more often than school boards.

3. The majority of school boards contact the media on a weekly basis, but the number contacting on a monthly basis was a close second.

4. The majority of school boards are contacted by the media weekly; again the number contacted only monthly was a close second.

5. The most frequent type of contact is of an informal nature (telephone calls, meeting at a school, conversing at a board meeting).

6. The majority of school boards use media lists, but they are not tailored for specific instances.

7. The majority of school boards do not have a Media Plan, but several indicated they are working on one.

8. Radio is the medium indicated by school boards as receiving the most use, followed by daily newspapers.

9. The number of school boards that have or

do not have a policy on who may speak to the media is fairly balanced. The majority of boards, however, do have a designated spokesperson and, at all times, not just in a crisis.

10. The majority of school boards use news releases often, usually weekly.

11. The majority of school boards rarely hold news conferences; the majority indicated one or two per year.

12. The majority of school boards have not been involved in a media crisis. Those that have been said it tended to involve strikes or school closings.

13. The majority of school boards do not have a crisis management plan; crises are dealt with on an *ad hoc* basis. Respondents did feel, however, that they should have such a plan in effect. The question stimulated many to begin planning for such a plan.

14. A majority of school boards indicated they have experienced negative relationships with the media at one time or another, but considered them insignificant. Most boards do not have a policy on this subject.

15. Most school boards have not sent letters to an editor for a change or retraction. One could assume that they are either satisfied with the reporting or felt that a letter to the editor would not accomplish its purpose.

16. The majority of school boards have never had occasion to charge the media or to take legal action against the media for negative or erroneous coverage.

STATISTICAL SUMMARY

Developing Positive Relationships

87 school boards believe they have a good relationship with the media.

4 school boards believe they have a bad relationship.

Contact Initiated by Board, by Media

Percentage		Number of Boards
By School Board	By Media	
2	98	1
10	90	1
15	85	2
20	80	10
25	75	12
30	70	4
35	65	1
40	60	8
50	50	21
60	40	6
70	30	3
75	25	7
80	20	3
85	15	1
90	10	6

How Often School Boards Contact the Media

46 weekly	6 every couple of months
21 daily	3 bi-weekly
31 monthly	2 once-twice a year

How Often the Media Contact School Boards

48 weekly	8 every couple of months
35 monthly	0 once-twice a year
16 daily	

Types of Contact between the Media and School Boards

- Most often contact is weekly, on an informal basis
- Next most common contact is by a media release, again weekly
- Most school boards have informal contact with the media weekly to daily
- Most school boards distribute a media release monthly to weekly
- Media conferences are rare, usually once or twice a year

Use of Media Lists

79 school boards have media lists
26 school boards do not have such lists
33 school boards have tailored lists for specific needs
40 school boards do not have tailored lists

6 school boards who use media lists did not respond to this question.

Media Plan

27 school boards have a Media Plan
70 school boards do not
Many indicated they are working on such a Plan

Types of Media Used by School Boards

Type	Number of School Boards
radio	73
daily newspapers	69
weekly/community papers	60
cable television	45
local television (not cable)	44
all of the above	9

Use of a Designated Spokesperson by School Boards

72 school boards use a designated spokesperson with the media
28 school boards do not
8 school boards use one only in a crisis situation
48 school boards use one all the time
58 school boards use their chief executive officer
20 school boards use their chairperson
15 school boards use their information officer
4 school boards use all of the above, depending on the issue
3 school boards use their executive assistant or the director
2 school boards said it depends on the issue

1 school board uses a superintendent

Board Policy on Who May Speak to the Media

42 school boards have such a policy
45 school boards do not

Frequency of News Releases

33 school boards issue one a week
27 school boards issue one a month
25 school boards issue one every couple of months
11 school boards issue one or two per year
1 school board issues one daily

Frequency of News Conferences

43 school boards hold one-two per year
17 school boards hold one every couple of months
16 school boards hold one a month

Media Crises

80 school boards indicated they have not been involved in a media crisis
10 school boards indicated they have been

Crisis Management Plans

63 school boards do not have a crisis management plan
37 school boards do have a crisis management plan
47 school boards indicated they have dealt with a crisis in the past
22 school boards indicated they have not dealt with a crisis

Negative Relationships with the Media

61 school boards have encountered a negative relationship with the media, but most qualified this statement by saying that it was a minor, insignificant incident

26 school boards said they have not had one

Policy for Dealing with Negative Publicity

72 school boards said they do not have such a policy

6 school boards indicated that they do

Letters to the Editor

60 school boards indicated they do not send letters to the editor

33 school boards have sent such letters

Taking Legal Action Against the Media

101 school boards have not taken legal action against the media

2 school boards have taken legal action; cases were not severe

93 school boards have never contacted a Press Council

3 school boards have made such contact

SIXTY STRATEGIC TIPS

Here is a compilation of tips offered by boards, gleaned from their tip sheets or through the survey, for working with the media and developing positive relationships. Although credit is not given for each individual tip here[24], a sample of some of the media guides and policies sent to us by the boards can be found in their whole in the appendices.

Rapport with the Media

1. Approach the media with care, sensitivity and respect.

2. Above all, be honest, accurate, frank, and friendly.

3. Don't assume a reporter will be impressed with your position.

4. Respect the fact that news people are trained professionals in their field.

5. Be available and accessible to the media.

[24] "Working with the Media," in *School Board Public Relations: The Complete Book* (Reston, Va.: National School Public Relations Association, 1986); "Tips and Suggestions: Communicating with the Media: Effective Relationships with News Media Representatives," Vancouver School Board, Tip Sheet; National Association of Secondary School Principals, *Newsletter*, October 1987.

6. Get to know your reporters, invite them for lunch, etc. Know what type of information they are looking for.

7. Treat all media fairly, don't play favourites.

8. Make sure that secretaries greet media requests with a pleasant rather than an antagonistic tone.

9. Respond to all media telephone calls and enquiries promptly.

10. Don't respond unless you know the answer.

11. Don't avoid or ignore the media.

12. Never lie.

13. Admit mistakes.

14. Don't hide information that can be shared.

15. Don't be afraid to say no to the media, but be courteous.

16. Explain if you can't answer their question and get back to them as soon as possible.

17. Reporters are busy, so get to the point and stay there.

18. Don't respond to hypothetical questions.

19. Don't use the phrase, "No comment."

20. Remember you are always "on the record." Don't try to make "off the record" comments.

21. After making an impromptu statement, jot down what you said.

22. Don't ask to see the story before release.

23. Don't ask to check a story. This creates a feeling of mistrust.

24. Don't try to suppress unfavorable news.

25. Don't try to tell a reporter how to write a story.

26. Don't be disappointed if all or any of your ideas are not used by the media.

Communication Planning

27. Develop a comprehensive board policy on media relations.

28. Develop a media guide for use within your educational system.

29. Designate one (or at most, two) spokespersons to deal with media on a regular basis or in crises.

30. Select appropriate media for situation/issue/news item.

31. Provide all media with regular (weekly, monthly) news tips about school events and accomplishments of students and staff.

32. Provide potential material for features.

33. Take the time to get all the facts before they are reported.

34. Be ready for the media when they arrive.

35. Maintain file of updated biographies of key administrators and trustees.

36. Prepare background for board meetings and other crucial meetings, *e.g.*, budget, school closings.

37. Know and respect reporters' deadlines.

38. Generate a media list.

39. Tip reporters off to colourful, action-filled photo opportunities.

40. Tell reporters what is most important; highlight what should be covered.

41. Try to provide material for balanced reporting. For a controversial issue, provide both sides of story.

42. Keep your publicity simple, direct and truthful.

43. Use media kits, when appropriate (for example, media conferences).

44. Find an interesting angle for your story.

News Releases

45. Issue media releases regularly, in a standard form and standard style. Name a contact.

46. Avoid (educational) jargon.

47. Use clear and simple language in both written and oral communication.

48. Keep the release to one page, if possible.

49. Use quotations to liven up a news release.

50. Don't expect a newspaper to publish news releases word for word.

Follow-Up

51. Periodically pick up the phone and tell the reporters they did a good job.

52. Write appreciation letters to reporters when they handle a tough assignment well. Forward a copy of the letter to their bosses.

53. Expect to be on the receiving end of criticism occasionally.

54. Don't complain if your stories, media re leases and photos don't make it into print.

55. If you have to complain about errors, remain calm; don't lose your temper.

56. If media errors are not too serious, forgive and forget.

57. If media errors are serious, react, but slowly and calmly. Don't flare up or lash out.

58. Don't blame reporters for something that is not their fault.

59. Remember, reporters don't write headlines - editors do.

60. Don't ask for clippings of an article. Go to a newsstand and buy the paper.

Ten Most Important Steps to Media Relations

From *Managing the Media*, by Ed Shiller [25]

1. Identify your major organizational goals and objectives.
2. Identify the key publics you want to reach.
3. Identify the activities or issues on which publicity would help advance your organization's goals and objectives.
4. Identify the key points you want to publicize.
5. Identify the media that will best carry your message.
6. Prepare or gather the materials for the media.
7. Distribute those materials by the most appropriate means.
8. Arrange for media interviews, if appropriate.
9. Prepare for media interviews.
10. Evaluate media coverage you received.

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25. Ed Shiller, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

Nine Rules for Dealing with the Media When They Call

From *Managing the Media*, by Ed Shiller[26]

1. Come up with relevant facts quickly.
2. Say "no" if you have to; be firm, but courteous and direct.
3. Don't say anything you don't want reported. There is no such thing as "off the record."
4. Don't play favourites with the media.
5. Probe tactfully for reporter's intentions and biases.
6. Have a positive attitude and be respectful and polite.
7. Get to know key reporters.
8. Understand the restraints under which the media operate.
9. Don't blame reporters for something they didn't do.

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26. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

APPENDICES

A Guide to Working with the Media
The Wellington County Board of Education, Guelph, Ontario

1. It is preferable to have *one* liaison person deal with the media.

2. Get to know your local media: newspapers (daily and weekly), radio stations and television stations that serve your area. Read the newspapers and familiarize yourself with the types of events they are interested in and their style of reporting. Every newspaper and radio station has an individual style.

3. Contact the editor(s) or news director to determine how you can assist them in covering events at your school, *e.g.*, what types of things are they interested in; how much notice do they need to take a photo, etc.

4. Find out what their deadlines are and honour them. Don't call a reporter one hour before or after his deadline and expect him to drop everything and have it in the next issue.

5. Always remember you are in competition. You are competing with numerous organizations and businesses for media coverage. You have to SELL your story to the media. Let them know why they should be interested in coming to your event as opposed to any other event. Make sure it is newsworthy.

6. Is there a unique angle to your event? For example, many schools planned an Olympic Day in

honour of the Canadian Winter Olympics. The school most likely to have attracted media attention was the school that invited a local former Olympic participant to officiate at the games and speak to the students. If you have a different angle stress it when approaching the media for coverage.

7. If circumstances warrant it, don't be afraid to call a media conference. This gives you an opportunity to provide the media with pertinent information, letting them have the chance to ask questions. It is also a time saver, allowing you to present your information to all the media at one time as opposed to repeating it four or five times. A media conference is often useful in a crisis.

8. If you have something newsworthy (and be certain it *is* newsworthy) don't hesitate to issue a media release.

9. Don't ask to see a story before it goes into print. This creates a feeling of mistrust. If you're concerned about the accuracy of the information (*e.g.*, it's very technical, political, etc.) prepare a fact sheet so you know the reporter has gone away with the correct information. Reporters are professionals and must be treated as such.

10. If you are not happy with the coverage you have received for an event, don't lose your temper and pick up the phone to complain. Take the time to discuss it with colleagues. You many not be objective in your thinking. If everyone agrees with you, take the time to think through your concerns and discuss it rationally with the reporter and/or editor. It only takes one heated argument to destroy a working relationship you have taken months to establish. Overlook typographical errors and spelling mistakes. If there has been a major factual error you can ask for a retraction to be printed in the next edition or you may want to write a letter to the editor clearly stating the correct information.

11. Do not complain if stories, media releases or photos do not make it to print. Editors have the right to print what they feel is of most interest to their readers. They also deal with space limitations. Don't let the fact your last story wasn't printed discourage you from issuing future media releases or calling the media to cover an event.

12. If a negative story appears do not get upset and complain. We must take the good with the bad. If, however, the facts are inaccurate refer to the advice offered in #10.

13. Don't ask a reporter to send you a story after it has been printed. It is up to you to secure your own copies and read the publication.

14. Avoid answering a reporter's question with "no comment." This creates the illusion that you are hiding something. Be honest with the media and tell them why you can't respond to their question.

15. If you feel you need to tell the media something but don't want it to go into print, preface the statement by saying this information is "off the record."

16 Don't be afraid to say "I don't know," but make a point of finding out and calling the reporter right back. Call back quickly because a reporter is always fighting a deadline.

17. If a crisis occurs take the time to get all the facts. Do not feel you have to respond to the media right away. Tell them you will get back to them and make sure you do, whether it's on an individual basis or by calling a media conference. Take the time to anticipate all the questions you may be asked and be prepared to answer them. Be honest and open with the media.

18. Be ready for the media when they arrive. If you know you are running behind give them a call. If the

originally agreed upon time is the only time they can make it try to arrange something for them (*e.g.*, a posed photograph, etc.).

19. Keep a list of the media handy, making sure it includes the following information: Media, Editor, Reporter, Address, Phone Number, Publication Deadlines.

The Ontario Press Council

The organization of the Ontario Press Council and its procedures for complaint is one example of how a press council operates and how institutions, such as school boards, can use this organization to complain about the conduct of the press.

There are several such agencies throughout the country, as well as specific councils that monitor radio and television broadcasts.

In Ontario, to the best of Executive Secretary Mel Sufrin's knowledge, there has never been a complaint from a board of education or any other educational institution to the Ontario Press Council. Sufrin attributes this "clean record" to the fact that most reporters and educational representatives are fair to each other; there is a mutual respect between both parties, he believes.

In the 1988 Annual Report of the Ontario Press Council, there were 144 complaints against the media received, compared with 132 in 1987. Sufrin notes the 1988 figure is not as high as in 1985, when there were 168 media complaints.

The Ontario Press Council has 113 members, including all 44 English language daily newspapers.

The Ontario Press Council is an independent body formed in 1972 by eight Ontario daily newspapers. It works for improvement in the performance of newspapers by adjudicating complaints from the public about the conduct of the press, helps press and public understand each other better, and defends the public interest in freedom of the press and related issues.

Through the Council, readers can call Ontario newspapers to account for unfair conduct such as invading privacy without justification, condemning people by innuendo or hearsay, ignoring commonly accepted ethical standards, reporting conjecture as fact, distorting accounts of events, or failing to acknowledge error.

Although the Council acts independently of its member newspapers, it vigorously defends the freedom of the press and full freedom of public expression.
- Ontario Press Council Information Brochure

According to the Ontario Press Council, the newspapers of Ontario:

- *realize that a democratic society has a legitimate interest in the quality of the information it receives;*

- *believe they should be accountable to readers for their conduct in gathering and publishing news, opinion and advertising;*

- *feel that the public interest needs a united voice on such issues as freedom of the press and access to government information.*

How to Make a Complaint

- Write to the Council, specifying the grievance, enclosing evidence such as clippings, copies of letters to editors.

• Complaint must concern specific published material.

• Council does not concern itself with complaints that are general in nature.

• Complaints should be made within the first six months of the grievance's occurrence.

• Complaints about opinion and the refusal of a paper to publish a letter to the editor will only be heard in exceptional cases.

Council's Procedures

According to Sufrin, these are the main procedures the Council advocates:

• If a problem exists, let the individual paper know.

• If the paper does not respond, approach the Press Council.

• Council sends the complaint material to the paper and seeks a response.

• If the individual/organization is not satisfied with response from the paper, the Council should be informed.

• Council asks for adjudication by a five-member board, which makes recommendations on the situation to the full Council.

• Council's criteria for judgement is not simply a difference of opinion between paper and individual or organization, but proof of erroneous reporting.

A Public Relations Policy
Lakeshore School Board, Beaconsfield, Quebec

The Lakeshore School Board believes that mutual trust between community and school is essential, because it fosters public confidence in its schools. Community attitudes and expectations are, therefore, important for elected commissioners and board employees to know, for support is achieved through effective two-way communication systems between school and community. Citizen participation imparts direction and meaning to the school program. Keeping the media informed enhances school-community relations. An open school climate is conducive to effective administrative, staff, student and parent relationships. Open board meetings further enhance good school-media relations.

Given these values, the Lakeshore School Board sets the following goals to be achieved:

1. To establish a two-way communications system between the school and its various publics.
2. To interpret board and administrative action.
3. To eliminate rumour and misunderstanding.
4. To develop a good working relationship with the media.
5. To disseminate pertinent information to all personnel.
6. To provide in-service training in school public relations as needed to teachers, administrators, and members of the Council of Commissioners.
7. To interpret each school's programs, along with its budget, to the school's publics.
8. To report student achievement to parents and the public.

9. To give staff achievement as much publicity as possible.

To accomplish these goals, the Lakeshore School Board has established a Marketing Task Force comprising commissioners and representatives of various staff groups whose responsibility it is to see that the school board's public relations activities are carried out by both the central office and individual schools. School principals are charged with the responsibility of carrying out their own school professional relations activities.